



CHAPTER 2

Overcoming Language Barriers for Non-Native Speakers of English: Learner Autonomy in Academic Libraries

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to give librarians a brief overview of the theory of learner autonomy and to explain how fostering its presence in libraries can help overcome language barriers for non-native speakers of English.

Language Barriers in Libraries

Non-native speakers of English comprise a large section of international students at many academic libraries in North America.¹ These students are

people who speak a language other than English as their native or first language. Not all international students are non-native speakers of English (for example, exchange students from Australia studying in the United States), and not all non-native speakers of English are international students (for example, native Spanish-speaking students who are first-generation college students in the United States). For those non-native speakers of English who are international students, however, language use can sometimes present barriers. One challenge of working with this student group in libraries can be their limited English proficiency. Since most North American librarians are not usually conversant in the native languages of many of these students, interactions with them can sometimes be fraught with misunderstanding and/or difficulty.

Language barriers faced by non-native speakers of English can be both linguistic and cultural. Linguistic barriers include difficulties comprehending native speakers in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These difficulties may be due to rate of speech, unknown vocabulary, inability to express thoughts in foreign words, anxiety in engaging in conversations, inability to process a large amount of text, or a myriad of other reasons.²⁻⁴ Cultural barriers could include misunderstandings of social cues, differing body language in a new culture, misinterpretation of the level of formality, unfamiliarity with written conventions, or lack of exposure to different social and educational norms, among many other reasons as well.^{5,6}

Overcoming these barriers requires both efforts by students as well as understanding by librarians. Rather than simply bemoaning their perceived lack of English language ability, however, librarians might be better served by considering the opposite side of this equation. In order to better understand and support these students, librarians should be actively involved in trying to improve their own efforts in these interactions as well. Ishimura and Bartlett, for example, note that many librarians might not be well prepared to offer information literacy sessions designed specifically for international students.⁷ To that end, they came up with a list of recommendations for needed librarian training in “teaching techniques, instruction planning (i.e., session or program content), cultural sensitivity training, and familiarization with students’ background and characteristics”⁸ through examples such as adjusting speaking styles and employing active listening techniques.

In addition to specialized training, another avenue for librarians to improve their own understanding and effectiveness in working with non-native speakers of English is to investigate learning theories and try to put them into practice. One learning theory that may help librarians better understand barrier-prone interactions and offer non-native speakers of English support in their library learning is learner autonomy. Librarians are in a unique position to put this particular learning theory into practice because it encompasses the idea of out-of-classroom learning.

Learner Autonomy in Libraries

Learner autonomy is a language learning concept. It arises from language learner autonomy, which is a field of study that looks at how languages are learned. Autonomy refers to a learning approach that is self-directed by the student engaged in the learning. The classic definition of learner autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.”⁹ Benson has added further thoughts to this original definition by untethering its practice from a formal classroom setting:

Autonomy is complex, multidimensional, and variably manifested. Autonomy is manifested in the form of autonomous language learning, which here refers to learning practices involving learners’ control over aspects of their learning or, more broadly, learning that takes place outside the context of formal instruction.¹⁰

Learner autonomy promotes learner self-direction. It does so by encouraging learners to make individual choices about how best to successfully learn. The individual learner drives their own learning. Autonomy therefore encompasses ideas such as self-directed learning, individualization, independence, interdependence, and motivation,¹¹ and it often pairs these aspects with self-awareness and reflection as ways to more deeply engage in its practice.¹² An example of learner autonomy is supporting foreign-language learners’ choices for practicing use of the language outside of a formal classroom setting. This can be done by giving students learning choices, such as selecting their own videos to watch, giving them opportunities to converse with native speakers in small groups, or offering them books to read in that language. The Independent Language Learning Center at the Freie Universität in Berlin, Germany, offers a concrete example of such support.¹³ The Language Centre at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom supports language learner autonomy in the same way,¹⁴ as does the Self-Access Learning Center at the Kanda University of International Studies in Japan.¹⁵

Learner autonomy is tied to ideas concerning andragogy as well, which is the study of how adults learn. One aspect of andragogy that lends itself especially well to learner autonomy is the idea of overcoming barriers:

The learning difficulties an adult often faces are about life situations (situational) during the time period when the learning process takes place. Also, [there] are... institutional barriers that include the practices and processes that discourage the working adult from participating in educational

activities as well as dispositional barriers which are related to the person's attitude and perceptions towards himself as a student.¹⁶

Using this framework, language barriers faced by non-native English speakers in academic libraries in North America could be seen as situational (their presence in an academic program conducted in English), institutional (their presence at a university operating in English), and dispositional (their level of self-esteem or confidence in using English).

Learner autonomy revolves around giving learners choices. Library choices could include how to study, where to study, and with whom to study. Academic libraries, in particular, offer students many choices in how to study (using local print materials in person or online materials from a distance), where to study (in a quiet zone or in open spaces), and with whom to study (individually or in a group study room). Library practice is rife with examples of giving learners choices in how to use resources, services, and spaces, although these choices are generally not labeled as learner autonomy choices. For example, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library gives users choices about which resources to search online through their Multi-Subjects Resources choice.¹⁷ A choice of which services can be used by learners is another common feature of most libraries' offerings, such as at the University of Toronto Libraries in Canada.¹⁸ And choices in study spaces abound at academic libraries as well, as for example at the State University of New York at Buffalo libraries.¹⁹ Offering learners such choices is a bedrock in supporting learner autonomy in and through libraries.

Another aspect of choice championed by academic libraries is personalized learning. The ability of any student to work on their own individual learning needs with a librarian offers students a powerful way to direct their own learning in a manner of their own choosing. Personalized learning could again take many forms, such as in-person interactions with a librarian or distance learning encounters also done individually with a librarian. Again, many of these choices are very evident in library practice, even if they are not being explicitly named as learner autonomy choices. For example, choices for individual research consultations can be seen at Ryerson University in Canada through their "book an appointment" option.²⁰ Individual distance learning opportunities are common as well, as through the Research Assistance service offered to distance students at the University of Alberta Libraries in Canada.²¹

Even in distance encounters, many choices for communication are available, such as chat, texting, and email options, as can be seen through the Ask a Librarian options at the Purdue University Libraries.²² Different online material options provided by librarians through research tutorials could also

serve personalized learning by giving students choices in how to study online, such as through videos, text, slides, infographics, or other forms of digital content, such as those evident at Northeastern University Libraries.²³ The personal librarian programs now underway at many academic libraries that have subject specialists reaching out to students in particular majors comprise the idea of personalized learning at heart as well, in that these encounters are meant to encourage individuals to connect with librarians. The University of Victoria Libraries in Canada offers a good example of a personal librarian program operating in this way.²⁴ Personalized learning in whatever form it is practiced gives librarians an ideal way to support and foster learner autonomy as a way to overcome language barriers with non-native speakers of English in academic libraries.

Overcoming language barriers can happen if students are given choices about how to communicate and interact with the library. These choices can reflect, support, and foster learner autonomy by including elements of linguistic and cultural awareness by librarians.

The following examples show various choices that librarians can offer to students as ways to overcome both linguistic and cultural language barriers in libraries. These examples are categorized below by the type of core librarian work each represents, such as instruction, assistance, and collection development. These categories encompass orientation activities, library classroom practices, individual service desk or research consultations, and collection development work. Some of these examples represent direct individual contact between librarians and non-native speakers of English, and other examples make use of intermediaries such as student library employees or other campus professionals who work with international students.

Examples of Library Practices

The academic library supplying the examples below is Brock University, which is a medium-sized public university in southern Ontario, Canada, of approximately 18,000 students. Of these students, about 2,500 are international, with the largest number currently coming from China, India, and Nigeria. Most of them are undergraduates (about 1,800) with the rest being graduate students. In addition to these students enrolled in degree programs, an ESL (English as a Second Language) Services department also offers intensive English language classes to about 700 students.

The library examples below come from service work engaged in by me as the liaison librarian for ESL students. These service activities include orientation work in welcoming new students to campus, information literacy activities in library instruction classrooms, one-on-one interactions with students

at service desks, and collection development work revolving around building collections that serve student needs.

In terms of how these activities relate to learning, the examples described below are meant to inspire an environment in which learner autonomy can flourish. A culture of flourishing learner autonomy affords students choices. The choices represented in these examples give students who are non-native speakers of English various ways to overcome language barriers in and through the academic library. The learning that students are expected to gain by choosing whether and how to participate in these choices is that of controlling the substance and direction of their own learning for overcoming language barriers in an autonomous way.

Orientation Activities

One good example of an orientation activity being developed at the Brock University Library for international students is a set of library welcome videos. These videos will be shown in library workshops for ESL students at the start of the academic year. They will also remain available on a library web page for students to view on their own.²⁵ The first versions of these videos are available at the time of this writing with the help of our Makerspace staff, who added music and visual images of our library to the audio file of international students speaking in their native languages.

The intention is for these foreign-language videos to support learner autonomy because they give new incoming students who are non-native speakers of English the choice of being welcomed to the library in either their own native language or in English. The hope is that they will also help overcome language barriers because they can be viewed multiple times and they can introduce new students to library jargon such as “open stacks” and “reserves.”

Another orientation example of library practice that supports learner autonomy is the presence of a librarian at the international student orientation information fair. At this fair, I positioned myself alongside a booth that displayed a “welcome to the library” sign in many different languages, along with brochures describing in more detail the programs and services that the library offers to them. Attending this fair felt like a very successful venture because I spoke with at least thirty new ESL students about how the library wants them to use our services.

Speaking one-on-one with ESL students at this orientation fair supports learner autonomy because it gives non-native speakers of English who are new to the university a chance to learn individually what the library can offer them. Attendance at this fair was voluntary, so speaking with a librarian is

also a choice a student can make. It can help ESL students overcome language barriers as well because it was a non-threatening social avenue for making initial contact. It also gave me an opportunity to model social cues such as smiling and shaking hands with strangers.

Library Classroom Practices

Conducting library instruction workshops with non-native speakers of English can provide another example for invoking learner autonomy. A library workshop can offer choices about practicing English in a non-graded environment. For example, I often put ESL students into pairs to discuss a research topic so that they can learn new vocabulary from each other. I also offer students in these workshops opportunities to volunteer answers in order to instill confidence in speaking English publicly. I always make it very clear that their oral answers are not being graded in any way in order to encourage them to speak, which often seems to work. I also tell them that I was an international student in Germany myself many years ago so that they know I can relate to their situation in Canada. I also model eye contact and the level of language formality that they will encounter in their other classes at the university.

Another classroom practice that can help overcome language barriers is a “teach-the-teacher” workshop that I have offered to the writing instructors in the university’s ESL program. The intent here is for the instructors themselves to replicate this library information into their own classrooms since I am not always available to deliver multiple sessions of the same workshop at the same time for many different classes of students. Students can overcome the language barriers because each individual instructor can choose to present the library information in whatever way they feel works best for their own students in their individual classes. This approach supports learner autonomy as well because it gives the ESL instructors choices as to how best to present and incorporate this information into their own classes.

Individual Service Desk or Research Consultations

An example of individual librarian contact being practiced at my university to supplement desk service is that of a “personal librarian” email messaging program mentioned earlier. This system allows liaison librarians to send automated email messages to individual students in a particular academic program at various times throughout an academic year. Any non-native speaker of English who is enrolled in an academic degree program at the university

would get these ongoing messages from the liaison librarian assigned to work with that particular academic department. While this system has worked well in general, its next iteration is more customized outreach to ESL students. Starting in the fall of 2018, I was able to designate “ESL Services” as a department equal to the degree-granting academic departments such as History, Political Science, Biology, etc. In this way, ESL students are now getting notifications of new library programs and services that I gear specifically to non-native speakers of English. I am doing this by simplifying the English language used in the messages, adding images, and highlighting my contact information as their designated “personal librarian.”

This practice should reflect learner autonomy because it will incorporate student choice as well. Choices could be to open and read the message, to click on any links, and to contact the librarian for any further information or assistance. Overcoming language barriers could be present as well since the message content can be saved and re-read and kept as a reference for later in the semester. And any vocabulary not understood can be looked up.

Another example of individual desk contact being extended is that of a student peer assistant training workshop that I offer every September to new student library assistants. This training session covers the topic of communicating effectively with non-native speakers of English at the student peer assistant library service desk. While directly inquiring as to whether or not a library user is a non-native speaker is not practiced, the following strategies are meant to ameliorate any communication encounters that might not be progressing smoothly at the peer assistant desk due to potential language miscommunications. Strategies that are modeled and discussed in this training session include giving any students options for answering if they cannot understand something, such as writing their question down or using a fellow student to translate if necessary. I also always suggest that the student peer assistants ask, “Does that make sense to you?” instead of asking, “Do you understand?” The reason for this is that the first question puts the onus on the peer assistant to re-phrase, slow down, or offer alternative words to explain something, while the second question puts all of the emphasis on the inquiring student’s language abilities. Incorporating language strategies such as these support learner autonomy and helps overcome language barriers for both students and student library peer assistants in their service desk interactions.

Collection Development

Collection development work may seem an unlikely place for librarians to support learner autonomy and overcome language barriers. However, the

building of collections can also offer choices in how to best support library users who are also ESL students.

One example is building an easy reader collection. The easy reader collection at Brock University is a set of print books that the library buys to support the extensive reading requirement of the ESL reading classes. This requirement states that every student in an ESL reading class must read one book of their own choice every week and write a book report on it. These books are short books that are adapted versions of original texts into simpler English. The books in the collection are designated the “IELP” readers for “Intensive English Language Program.”²⁶

This easy reader collection supports learner autonomy by offering students many choices about what material to read. Choices include the content of the book (fiction or non-fiction, for example) and level of reading difficulty. This collection can also help ESL students overcome language barriers by increasing their English vocabulary in a gradual way. ESL students can choose books that are simpler for them to understand or they can choose texts that challenge their own level of vocabulary or content knowledge.

Another example of library collection development work supporting learner autonomy and overcoming language barriers is our international student LibGuide.²⁷ This online guide consists of a collection of links to English language learning material of all kinds in the library as well as to outside websites that offer English-language learning content to ESL students anywhere. It supports learner autonomy by offering students multiple choices for developing their own English learning capabilities outside of the classroom. It could also give ESL students a way to overcome language barriers by giving them ways to privately practice their English reading, writing, and speaking skills.

All of the examples cited above can support learner autonomy and offer ESL students choices for overcoming language barriers through the library.

Assessment and Discussion

The examples above suggest that academic libraries can enable learner autonomy by supporting and fostering language choices designed to overcome language barriers for non-native speakers of English in or through the library. The number and types of choices can be measured. For example, more than thirty ESL students approached me over the course of two hours at the August 2017 orientation fair. Similarly, counts can be kept of how many times ESL students accessed a LibGuide after an information literacy session or how many times they viewed a library welcome video in a foreign language. As of this writing, the International Students LibGuide at Brock University

has been visited more than 3,500 times in the last two years. Librarians can keep count of how many interactions take place at a service desk one-on-one with non-native speakers of English as well as the number of times students checked out an easy reader. The easy reader collection at Brock University, for example, is the most circulated collection of books in the open stacks of the entire library.

Quantitative counts can also be supplemented with qualitative assessment. Such additional forms could include observation, such as when a librarian gives an information literacy session and observes whether or not students are participating and to what degree. They could also include collecting anecdotes from service desk encounters or from ESL instructors functioning as intermediaries between librarians and ESL students. Collecting direct informal feedback from the ESL students themselves is a further option. Avenues to do this could include soliciting direct feedback from an online survey after an instruction session or after the viewing of a video. Qualitative feedback that I have collected from ESL students has included oral comments such as “Thank you for being at this fair so we know who can help us” and written comments after library workshops such as “now I am a better library searcher.” I use all qualitative feedback that I collect to reflect on and improve my own practice. For example, when I learned that students liked paper handouts, I made sure to bring printed copies of handouts to all of my sessions. And when students indicated that they felt like they were bothering me by sending me email questions, I began to tell every class I met with that I looked forward to sending them email messages through the personal librarian program that is just beginning here for ESL students.

Measuring perceptions of overcoming language barriers and engaging in learner autonomy could potentially take multiple forms as well, such as online surveys, personal interviews, or focus groups. More important than the form would be the ability to tease out language learning choices and self-reflection from the content of library directions, instruction, or discussion. I have tried to do this in various ways. I have asked students who are non-native speakers of English directly, for example, if they are engaging in English vocabulary language learning when they search library databases.²⁸ I have also asked ESL students who had to write an essay for their writing class if writing about how to use the library helped them improve both their English and their library learning skills.²⁹

Other disciplines could offer librarians further ways to measure how language barriers are overcome or if learner autonomy is present. Lee, Sulaiman-Hill, and Thompson, for example, quantify the use of bilingual helpers in the workplace to overcome language barriers.³⁰ Weldon et al. assess the use of incorporating cultural awareness in a workplace setting to overcome language barriers.³¹ Gholami invokes forms of self-assessment to measure

learner autonomy.³² Everhard and Murphy offer various tools and techniques to collect learner autonomy measurements.³³

As a way to begin, academic libraries can acknowledge that language barriers do exist for non-native speakers of English. They can then consider offering ways for these students to potentially overcome these barriers. What libraries cannot do, however, is *cause* learner autonomy to happen. Instead, libraries can offer a conducive environment in which it *may* happen. As noted by Bennett, creating a conducive environment for learning to happen ought to be the primary function of academic libraries.³⁴ This view speaks to the importance of environment in general for the burgeoning of learning.³⁵

Conclusion

Learner autonomy gives librarians a useful theory for understanding the importance of offering choices to students for overcoming language barriers. The examples this chapter offers suggest that these choices can potentially support and foster the presence of learner autonomy in academic libraries. Library examples include orientation activities, library classroom practices, one-on-one interactions at service desks, and building collections for non-native speakers of English.

It may be worthwhile to end on an inclusive note. Librarians should consider that learner autonomy can enhance both librarian and student learning through choices. They can give non-native speakers of English many choices about how to interact with the library in ways that could help ESL students overcome language barriers. For librarians, too, however, choice plays an equally important role. By fostering learner autonomy, we can choose to offer non-native speakers of English various ways to overcome language barriers in our library environments. In so doing, we may be enhancing our own learning about which ways work best for supporting the learning of non-native speakers of English.

Endnotes

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